

Northampton faces music on infrastructure

EDITORIAL

Northampton Mayor David J. Narkewicz has been hearing from residents and businesses that city services are already too expensive – and they can't afford to pay more for them.

A year ago, when the mayor proposed an increase in water and sewer rates, residents came to hearings, some in tears, to say they're just scraping by. Narkewicz appeared to listen. Within 24 hours of being peppered with questions by Northampton seniors, the mayor relented on a rate change. He praised residents for raising questions. One was whether the city could offer discounts on income grounds.

It was close to a budget deadline and the first time the mayor and City Council were setting water and sewer rates, following a charter change. "I felt like it was not a good way to make public policy, under those kinds of time constraints," he told a *Gazette* reporter at the time.

The mayor promised to do his research. And rather than raising rates for the 2016 fiscal year, the city froze them at 2015 levels, at a significant cost in lost revenues.

And then, as happens in modern life, the issue went away – though everyone actually paying attention knew it would be back. Public works officials have warned for years a big bill was going to come due on delayed maintenance. In January, months ahead of budget deadlines and with an outside report in hand, Narkewicz was back with a proposal that responded to questions residents raised last spring. Those questions – about conservation, helping the disadvantaged, equity among the types of water and sewer users and the need to stabilize revenues – guided the work by the independent consultants. And now, they are pillars of the mayor's proposed "tiered" approach to charging users different rates for water and sewer services.

In a change, small water and sewer users (mainly residents and small businesses) and large customers (bigger businesses and institutions) would pay different rates. To explain this complicated stuff, the city created a webpage with a tool that allows customers to calculate how their rates would change. This spring, it was mainly businesses that objected. After a first wave of complaints from the business community, Narkewicz, who is trying to finesse a difficult policy change, lowered the size of the rate increases. Today, the mayor will once again stand before constituents to describe the rate plan. He's been listening, and so should all those who attend the 5 p.m. session in the second-floor Hearing Room at City Hall.

The city needs to raise its water and sewer rates because Northampton badly needs to upgrade its 37-year-old wastewater treatment plant, last rehabbed 20 years ago. It still carries significant debt on the \$28 million water treatment plant constructed in 2008 under a federal mandate.

The word "water" can make people cringe in Northampton these days, because residents have also been dealing with higher costs from a stormwater and flood control fee. Under the mayor's latest proposal, approved in a 8-1 initial vote by the City Council but still facing another council tally April 21, the typical residential customer would save \$4 on quarterly bills for water and sewer. But some businesses would see considerable jumps in costs. A *Gazette* report found that Florence Pizza would pay \$4 more each quarter, Stop & Shop about \$125 more, Cooley Dickinson Hospital \$3,810 more and Coca-Cola \$76,810 more.

The city's goal is to augment water service revenues by 2 percent a year and sewer revenue by 3 percent a year so it can be prepared to cover nearly \$30 million in upgrades to the sewer plant between fiscal

years 2017 and 2021, along with \$7 million in improvements to water lines and dams.

A call last week by some business owners to spread around the higher costs has merit. Rather than see rates fall \$16 a year for the “typical” residential customer, they could be tweaked so that these customers would carry at least some of the increased burden.

No one can responsibly argue that the city should neglect its infrastructure needs. Doing so tends to cost even more in the long run. The solution Narkewicz has shaped is reasonable. It protects vulnerable individuals and promotes water conservation. It stares a real problem in the face and doesn’t look away.

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